WILDLIFE CORRIDOR CONSERVATION AUTHORITY

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MEMORANDUM

Date: January 12, 2005

To: Governing Board Members

From: Judi Tamasi

Re: Rio Hondo Watershed Management Plan

Please note that the Rio Hondo Watershed Management Plan has been completed. A few excerpts are attached for your information.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Purpose and Background

The purpose of the Rio Hondo Watershed Management Plan is to provide an organizing framework for municipalities, conservation organizations, and individuals to work together to improve the water quality, health, habitat, and recreation potential of the Rio Hondo Watershed. This Watershed Management Plan identifies goals and strategies necessary to manage the overall watershed as a healthy, life giving natural system. This plan also outlines steps to facilitate the establishment of a watershed consortium, which would be responsible for communication of information, identification of priorities, funding development, creation of new projects, and long-term implementation of watershed improvements.

The Rio Hondo Watershed Management Plan was made possible by a $200,000 grant to the San Gabriel Valley Council of Governments. The San Gabriel and Lower Los Angeles River and Mountains Conservancy facilitated the grant and application processes. The following statement is provided at the request of and in appreciation to the state funding agency:

> *Funding for this project was provided in full or in part through a contract with the State Water Resource Control Board (SWRCB) pursuant to the Costa-Machado Water Act of 2000 (Proposition 13) and any amendments thereto for the implementation of California's Nonpoint Source Pollution Control Program. The contents of this document do not necessarily reflect the views and the policies of the SWRCB, nor does mention of trade names or commercial products constitute endorsement or recommendation for use.*

To guide the development of the watershed plan, a project management team was formed among the following organizations:

- San Gabriel Valley Council of Governments (SGVCOG),
- San Gabriel and Lower Los Angeles River and Mountains Conservancy (RMC),
- Los Angeles Regional Water Quality Control Board (LARWQCB),
- County of Los Angeles Department of Public Works (LACDPW), and
- Moore, Iacofano, Goltsman, (MIG) Inc, a public policy and environmental consulting firm was selected to manage and facilitate the process.

A Policy Advisory Committee (PAC) was also formed which represented thirty-six organizations within the watershed. Key stakeholders, including cities, other public

agencies at the local, state, and federal level, as well as various private conservation groups, were represented in the PAC. The PAC met periodically and provided a forum for discussions intended to identify issues of concern, determine priorities, and develop a consensus around which a plan could be created.

Unique Characteristics of the Rio Hondo Watershed

The Rio Hondo watershed is a subwatershed of the Los Angeles River watershed, and is also linked to the adjacent San Gabriel River watershed. This link reflects both natural hydrologic processes and human intervention. Historically, the Los Angeles and San Gabriel Rivers were wide shallow rivers consisting of a braided series of channels that would periodically intermingle following large storm events. As a result of this dynamic, the Rio Hondo once formed the main bed of the San Gabriel River. Today, however, this dynamic has been engineered into three channels have been created to bring water from the San Gabriel to the Rio Hondo, making the Rio Hondo serves as a *distributary* for the San Gabriel River.

The Rio Hondo watershed is also unique in that two very different landscapes shape the overall character of the 142 square miles that fall within the boundaries of the watershed. The rugged steep terrain of the San Gabriel Mountains defines the upper reaches of the watershed, much of which lies within the Angeles National Forest. This natural undeveloped landscape changes dramatically below the foothills where the nature of the watershed is transformed by the very urban and largely built out San Gabriel Valley. Encompassing 21 different cities and unincorporated portions of Los Angeles County, this densely developed urban landscape includes only a few remaining areas of open space and isolated patches of natural habitat.

Vision for a Healthy Watershed

The vision of a healthy vital Rio Hondo watershed, as portrayed in Chapter III, is one that balances the needs of sustaining a healthy ecosystem, including habitat for animals, within the context of providing clean water and flood control in an urban environment. A healthy watershed is able to perform its natural and urban hydrologic functions, such as capturing and filtering runoff, slowing releases of runoff into streams and rivers– and groundwater recharge within the surrounding urban environment. Such a watershed is no longer hidden underneath the built environment but is integrated in ways that allows it to function in harmony with the environment and normal activities of the people who live, work, and play in the area.

Key Issues

The existing political jurisdictions and local communities do not reflect the natural landscape or the scale of the watershed.

- Numerous different political jurisdictions at the municipal, county, state, and federal level overlay the watershed.
- The communities of the watershed are demographically complex with wide ranging differences in income, population density, ethnicity, and languages spoken.
- There is a general lack of public awareness about the watershed in particular and watershed issues in general.
- There is no organization or group working on behalf of the watershed as a whole
- There is no watershed wide governance structure.

Groundwater storage and natural habitats have been heavily impacted by urban development and flood control systems:

- Impervious surfaces have reduced water percolation into the water table
- Water quality is adversely affected by non-point source pollution, especially storm water runoff, entering the watershed from multiple diverse sources in multiple land use areas.
- The lower two reaches of The Rio Hondo are designated as impaired water bodies on the states 303 (d) list because of trash, copper, lead, zinc, ammonia, pH, and coliform bacteria which requires the establishment of Total Maximum Daily Load (TMDL) standards for each of these pollutants.
- Beneficial uses of the Rio Hondo have been negatively impacted by this polluted runoff.

The developed portion of the watershed is largely built out, with consequences for both human and ecological communities.

- There is a scarcity of open space in the developed portions of the watershed.
- There are an insufficient number of parks, in terms of both acreage and accessibility, to serve the existing population.
- Most native habitat has been converted to urban uses and the small patches of remaining habitat may not be adequate to support native species.
- Native species have also been severely impacted by competition from invasive non-native species.

Goals

Nine goals are identified in this Watershed Management Plan. Seven goals further develop and articulate the Rio Hondo Watershed Vision as described in Chapter II, the Watershed Management Framework. The seventh goal emphasizes the need to achieve multiple goals in any particular project. Two additional goals address implementation priorities in Chapter IV. Together, these goals reflect the ideal that a healthy watershed is able to successfully integrate dynamic natural systems balanced with community needs and interests. The Goals stated in this plan are:

1. Improve in-stream water quality to meet or exceed Regional Water Quality Control Board standards and NPDES permitting requirements. Implement a wide array of Stormwater Best Management Practices (BMPs) to optimize local water resources and reduce dependence on imported water while increasing beneficial water uses available to the public.
2. Create, enhance, and protect open space through active acquisition of parcels that serve multiple-purpose uses, including; conservation, improvement of aesthetics, community development and connectivity.
3. Improve habitat quality, quantity and connectivity with watershed management and restoration of stream channels. Combine existing habitat and creation of new habitat where possible to strengthen habitat migration corridors. Establish habitat areas for use by wild creatures, and other habitat areas with the addition of public access and education as appropriate.
4. Improve recreational opportunities as a function of watershed management. Use interpretative opportunities afforded by recreation to enhance watershed awareness and identity.
5. Ensure that public health and safety are integrated into all aspects of watershed enhancement.
6. Maintain current minimum flood protection levels and develop new flood protection strategies to meet the multiple goals required for watershed improvement.
7. Develop priority projects that address multiple goals simultaneously.
8. Create an effective institutional framework from which to focus sustained efforts on improvement of the Rio Hondo Watershed by providing oversight, management, and measurement of recovery and restoration within the watershed.
9. Improve the long-term health of the watershed by establishing public awareness and stewardship campaigns that educate the public about their role in improving water quality and the overall health of the watershed.

Recommendations for Implementation

To initiate implementation requires action on several parallel tracks. Of particular importance is the need to establish an organizing body or Watershed Consortium to implement the Watershed Plan. The PAC should initially resume meeting under auspices of DPW, RMC, SGVCOG or other agency sponsor, and agree in principal to establish the Watershed Consortium. Then the PAC could form various action-oriented subcommittees to pursue initiatives needed to begin actual watershed management. A possible organizational framework is suggested below.

Suggested Organizational Framework

Organizational Subcommittee

→ Explore formation of a Watershed Consortium

Funding Subcommittee

→ Identify and pursue funding opportunities; development of a long-term funding strategy

Projects Subcommittee

→ Develop priorities in each of the subwatershed target areas. Start at three priority locations and watershed-wide initiatives

Assessment Subcommittee

→ Identify and implement initial studies needed for baseline existing conditions identification

Watershed Awareness Subcommittee

→ Develop a watershed-wide constituency and education programs.

Tasks for an Organizational Subcommittee

- Utilize Watershed Conservation Authority (WCA), the recent JPA between LACDPW and RMC, as a possible organizational model for the watershed consortium. Investigate ways to encourage municipalities to participate, such as matching grant funding when possible.
- Pursue Proposition 50 funding under The Integrated Regional Water Management Program, as a catalyst for formation of Rio Hondo Watershed Consortium.

Tasks for a Funding Subcommittee

- Develop long-term funding strategy and fiscal mechanism for tracking funding opportunities, obtaining grants, managing existing funds, and monitoring expenditures.
- Explore feasibility of forming a special assessment district.

Timeline/Workplan

1st Quarter/Initial Organizational Development

- PAC resumes meeting
- PAC forms subcommittees to implement components of watershed plan
- Initiate Watershed Consortium formation process (*Organizational Subcommittee*)
- Pursue Proposition 50 grant application in conjunction with watershed consortium formation activities (*Funding Subcommittee*)
- Establish information collection and distribution protocols (*Watershed Assessment Subcommittee*)

2nd Quarter (but only after formation of Watershed Consortium, including completion of staff recruitment and other organizational tasks)

- Develop long-term funding strategy, including possibility of creating special assessment district (*Funding Subcommittee*)
- Identify a select number of projects as possible candidates for immediate implementation (*Projects Subcommittee*)
- Perform a cost/benefit analysis to further refine list of candidate projects for implementation in the early phase of watershed plan implementation (*Projects Subcommittees*)
- Design water quality monitoring and bio assessment programs, including sampling methodology (*Watershed Assessment Subcommittee*)

3rd Quarter

- Continue development of watershed assessment program and begin implementation of selected studies when ready. (*Watershed Assessment Subcommittee*
  - Initiate water quality monitoring and bio assessment programs
  - Expand land use data base and correlate with water quality monitoring results
  - Begin efforts to map existing storm drain and flood control system
  - Initiate inventory of invasive species
- Use initial watershed assessment results to establish a baseline of critical watershed health indicators
- Continue funding, planning and design efforts for projects selected for immediate implementation

- Begin development of watershed public outreach and education campaign (*Watershed Awareness Subcommittee*)

4th Quarter

- Use initial findings from watershed assessment to begin process of identifying and/or confirming future project opportunities *(Projects and Watershed Assessment Subcommittees)*
- Continue watershed assessment activities
- Initiate market analysis study to assess public awareness of watershed

2nd Year

- Use initial watershed assessment results to develop a model of watershed functioning
  - Continue to refine and develop watershed model as additional assessment analysis and findings become available
  - Use results from ACE and LACDPW hydrologic model when available
- Begin funding, planning, and design efforts for initial projects developed on the basis of ongoing watershed assessment studies
- Assess extent of progress for all projects selected for immediate implementation
  - Is implementation on schedule, and if not determine what actions are required to push forward on implementation.
- Use results from market analysis to tailor watershed awareness message and develop public outreach materials
  - Begin initial public outreach activities